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## THE MONOLOGUE OF BROWNING

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Hardly another poet in the whole course of English literature has met with such violent and continuous partisanship as Robert Browning. When Wordsworth put forth his epoch-making little volume of *Lyrical Ballads*, he too met derision, but it lasted only twenty years. By the time he reached middle age his position as a master was assured, and his limitations were well understood. Over Browning disputation has continued longer. Throughout his life and during the quarter-century since his death he has had ardent assailants and just as ardent defenders. Persons of standing declare the man a barbarian, who broke into the fair fields of verse with poetry cacophonous in sound, obscure in expression, and shocking in subject. On the other hand, there are those who regard Browning as half divine. He is a prophet, they say, and has so disclosed to them the significance of their personal lives that they cannot hear any criticism of him without a shiver. Sometimes Browning is set up in laudatory antagonism to Tennyson, or Tennyson in antagonism to Browning; and certainly these poets do differ fundamentally. But are their differences disparaging or supplemental? I believe I shall find the safest approach to my heated subject if,

without praise or blame, I coolly note some of the points of contrast between the two.

Tennyson is English for many generations; Browning is of compound nationality. Tennyson lived in England and found his subjects there; Browning lived long on the continent and gathered his subjects from everywhere except England. Tennyson is a university man; Browning had a miscellaneous education. Tennyson is acquainted with physical science; Browning only with literature, many literatures. Tennyson's life is rooted in institutions; Browning cares little for them. Tennyson has a strong interest in the social and religious questions of his age; Browning only in the problem of self-development. Through many generations Tennyson was connected with the Established Church; Browning, his parents, and his wife were Congregationalists. Tennyson was an idealistic recluse; Browning a realistic man of the world. Tennyson's figures are generalized; Browning's particularized. Tennyson's favorite time is that of the mediæval myth; Browning's the later Renaissance. Tennyson aims at beauty, through approved and standard language; Browning at force and expressiveness. Tennyson chooses for subjects graceful and harmonious incidents; Browning unusual and startling ones. Tennyson is the conscious artist, ever correcting; Browning the spontaneous improvisatore. Tennyson has an exceptional mastery of poetic technique; Browning is rugged and bizarre. Tennyson has many of the traits of a refined and timid woman; Browning is all manliness and optimism. Tennyson was a dramatist at the end of his life; Browning at the beginning.

What amazing contrasts are here! Yet the two poets never conceived of themselves as rivals. On the contrary, Tennyson inscribed his *Tiresias* thus: "To my good friend, Robert Browning, whose genius and geniality will best appreciate what may be best, and make most

allowance for what is worst, this volume is affectionately dedicated." And Browning had earlier written in his volume of *Selections* these careful words: "Dedicated to Alfred Tennyson. In poetry—illustrious and consummate. In friendship—noble and sincere." It will not then become us to take sides in the fictitious antagonism. Rather, in considering Browning, we must lay aside partisanship and endeavor—however contentious be the ground—to inquire dispassionately what Browning stands for. What is his type?

To determine this, let us for a moment turn back to the Classicists, as their work culminated in Pope, and recall how largely with them poetry was removed from ordinary life, from the life at least of the individual. It was a social affair. Its figures were cultivated men and women who appear conversing with their kind. Literature accordingly stood, as it were, somewhat apart from ordinary existence, having its own laws, its own diction. It was not called on to mirror my life or your life, or to use the language of our homes. Of course as time went on, and especially as the followers of Pope cheapened his refined standards, there came a revolt, and individual life was declared to be the important thing. When then Wordsworth, as the leader of this Romantic Movement, sets out to depict the actualities of experience, we should expect him to bring before us men and women as we find them on the street. But this he did not do. While turning away from artificial human nature and studying with penetrating veracity genuine persons, he was chiefly interested in those central emotions which build up homes and states, and rather oblivious to such momentary changes as, going on in all of us, differentiate man from man. Precisely to these Tennyson devotes himself and thus gives to naturalistic verse a psychological depth it had not previously known. But he studies moods rather than persons. The single phases of humanity so

vividly set forth by him do not properly belong to John, Thomas, or Susan, but are universal, though temporary, aspects of any human being. The companions of Ulysses whom we meet in Lotus Land cannot be distinguished from one another. Edward Gray's melancholy over Ellen Adair might as well have been that of Peter Robinson for Mary Brown. How characterless is Maud! "Dead perfection, no more." The delightful Grandmother is so grandmotherly as to belong to no special race, time, or village. All these people are abstractions, representative of single traits, with as little blood in them as any figure of Ben Jonson's or Dickens'. Novelists—Richardson, Fielding, Scott, Miss Austen—had long before made their readers acquainted with total human beings. But none such had yet appeared in poetry, unless in the pages of that half poet, half novelist, Crabbe. Neither Byron, Shelley, nor Keats knows anything of living men and women.

There is then something still to be done if poetry will listen to Wordsworth's call and, abandoning conventions, deal with the realities of common life. Whoever can make us feel the complex and unstable unity of an individual person will introduce a new and highly important type into English poetry. This is the aim of Browning, and from it spring most of his peculiarities. Announcement of that aim is made in the preface to *Sordello*, where he writes: "My stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul. Little else is worth study." Accordingly Browning pays the least possible attention to outward nature. Only two or three of his poems set forth nature at all. There is *De Gustibus*, *The Englishman in Italy*, and *Home Thoughts from Abroad*. Is there another in which nature is the theme, or even where, as in Tennyson, nature forms a sympathetic background for human action? Browning's figures need no background. They stand firmly on their own feet. The

disposition then to turn to individual life and, without apology or attempt to justify the choice of subject by any lesson it might teach; simply to say, "The precious thing in all the world is the personal being. Whatever he does and says deserves attention"—this democratic individualism is what gives distinction to Browning, though it was also the special gospel of his age. Carlyle, Emerson, Arnold, John Stuart Mill, George Eliot, were all proclaiming it. Browning gives it appropriate form in poetry. The circumstances of his life shaped him admirably for the work.

That life is six years shorter than Tennyson's, beginning three years later and ending three years earlier; that is, it extends from 1812 to 1889. It divides itself into four periods, in close parallelism to those of Tennyson. Like his too they are entirely literary periods, not periods formed by outward events. The first we may call his Juvenile period, from his birth to 1828, a momentous date in Browning's life; for he then fell in with the poems of Shelley. The second is his period of Experiment, from 1828 to 1840 or 1842, the publication of the *Bells and Pomegranates*. Then comes his period of Mastery, when at last he has found himself, knows exactly what his work in the world is to be, and sets eagerly about it. This period runs from the *Bells and Pomegranates* to *The Ring and the Book* in 1870—or if we will be exact, 1869. The last is his period of Decline and Sophistry, from 1870 to 1889. Of this last I shall say little, except that, while it contains many bits of vigorous verse, his fame would, in my judgment, be more secure if all written after *The Ring and the Book* could be struck out. It is the early periods which require attention. If we would rightly measure Browning's subsequent stature, we must carefully observe his growth.

He was a city boy, born at Camberwell, a suburb of London. In cities he always made his home, using the

country merely for occasional refreshment. Tennyson spent three-quarters of his life in the country; by birth and education he is connected with the ruling class. Browning belongs with the average multitude. Probably his great-grandfather was a waiter at a country inn. His grandfather came to London, entered the service of the Bank of England, and rose rapidly to prominence and considerable wealth. From sharing in this wealth his second wife cut off the children of the first marriage. Browning's father was therefore obliged to care for himself and was unable to obtain a university education. He too became a clerk in the Bank of England, where by diligence he ultimately attained something more than a competence. Having always an eager desire for knowledge, he accumulated a library of six or seven thousand volumes and was able to use books in French, German, and Italian. He was a genial man, fond of drawing and writing stories, and had always a special fancy for whatever was curious and unusual.

I have called Browning a man of composite ancestry, and the fact affected, I believe, the interests of his whole life. His father was an Englishman, his mother a Scotch woman, her father a German merchant of Hamburg. His own father's mother was a Creole from the West Indies. Four nationalities contribute to the formation of this extraordinary man; and it has been surmised, though on slender evidence, that there was also Jewish blood in him. May not these diversities within himself have broadened his sympathies and fitted him more readily than would have been possible had he been thoroughly an Englishman, to comprehend and create the many strange creatures who move across his pages?

His education was similarly miscellaneous. The atmosphere of his home was literary, and his own early literary tastes were strong. But they were entirely unguided by the restraints and standards of a university

or even of continuous schooling. For only a few years at a time was he connected with any school. For less than a year when he was fifteen he attended a Greek class at London University. From that time his father's library was, as it had always really been, his chief source of intellectual nourishment. His constant reading of unusual books made him self-educated and a scholar. Music too he loved, and under the stimulating guidance of his friend, Eliza Flower, he became an adept in musical science. Strange that one of the harshest of modern poets should also be one of the most accomplished in music!

Early in life he showed a taste for poetry and began to write it. His father had been bred in the Classical tradition and looked with disfavor on Romanticism. His library was rich too in the Metaphysical poets. Quarles and Donne early became favorites of young Browning. By the time he was twelve years old he had written a little volume of verse, which he desired to publish under the title of *Incondita*. Thus early appears the taste for fantastic titles. The manuscript was submitted to the critical judgment of a London editor, Rev. W. G. Fox, who advised against its publication, and it was destroyed. But it brought him, besides a wise critic, two deeply valued friends introduced by Mr. Fox, the Misses Flower. Both wrote verse; Sarah, the younger, being the author of the hymn, "Nearer, my God, to thee," and the elder, Eliza, nine years older than Browning, continuing for a long time the object of his romantic devotion. Her he idealized in Pauline. When in boyhood he declared that he wished to devote his life to poetry, his indulgent parents did not gainsay him. He accordingly was prepared for no profession, but in his father's library took all literature for his province.

In 1828 something momentous happened. Browning came upon a copy of Shelley's *Queen Mab*, and persuaded



his mother to give him the rest of Shelley's poems on his next birthday. A new conception of poetry was now opened to him. Byron he had known before. But Shelley disclosed to him the full freedom of Romanticism, its mysticism, its magical music, its penetrating exploration of the human soul. Yet I cannot help thinking that he, like Tennyson, made a false start. Shelley's genius and his own were at the farthest possible remove. Tennyson, after gaining a certain fluency from Byron, withdrew promptly and unharmed to his own proper field. But Browning spent nearly ten years over the impossible task of writing pieces as shapeless as those of Shelley. He always felt gratitude for the one who first awoke him, but after 1840 abandoned him as a guide.

We all know the twofold character of Shelley. He is the inspired lyrist, panting forth a flood of rapture so divine as few poets of plaintive passion have equalled in any land. And then he is the creator of *Queen Mab*, *Alastor*, and the rest of that ungainly crew, who at inordinate length preach the theories of Godwin and the dreams of the French Revolution. The lyric Shelley, the seer, lay obviously beyond Browning's reach; but in the expository Shelley, the teacher, there was something which for a time strongly attracted him. In pursuit of it he wrote *Pauline*, *Paracelsus*, *Sordello*—all attempts, as he says in the preface to *Sordello*, to trace through successive stages the development of a soul. The long poem, with this sort of Pilgrim's Progress as its subject, was much in the fashion of the day. Shelley's *Alastor* gave it impetus among the intellectuals, Bailey's *Festus* among the populace. Wordsworth shaped it into a masterpiece in his *Prelude*. No wonder that Browning, who was to become a closer student of character than any previous poet, felt himself drawn to it at the beginning of his career. In 1833, three years after Tennyson's *Poems Chiefly Lyrical* appeared (and it will be remem-

bered that there was three years' difference in the ages of the two poets), Browning put forth *Pauline*, following her in 1835 with *Paracelsus*, and in 1840 with *Sordello*. In each of these, by different methods, he attempted to trace the formation of a particular individual throughout the entire extent of his life; to see him aspiring, failing, groping, and ever moving from a small understanding of himself and the world to a large. All these books were published at the expense of members of Browning's family, and all failed. Few copies were sold and little notice of them was taken. Here and there were readers intrepid enough to find their way through the literary jungle to merit. But they were naturally few.

Already, however, in 1837 the actor Macready thought he could detect underneath the intricacies of Browning's early books a talent for portraying character. He asked Browning for a play, and *Strafford* was produced five nights at Covent Garden. It was expected to run three weeks. Browning and his hardened eulogists have always blamed the actors for its withdrawal; but a single reading should convince any one that the play itself made failure inevitable. Yet the attempt at play-writing formed an important second step in Browning's advance toward individual portraiture.

The method first tried had been a serial one, stage succeeding stage in the development of a person. It had proved too theoretic, vague, and dilatory for a genius so forcibly concrete as Browning. A drama removes these objectionable features. A rounded individual is then at once thrown open to inspection, as he sets forth his own point of view in contrast with that of opposing characters. This would seem to be the very field in which Browning would shine. For half a dozen years he thought so, and spoke of himself as "Robert Browning, writer of plays." Each year saw a new tragedy fall from his rapid pen. Occasionally, as in the first two acts of

*Pippa Passes*, something vivid and memorable was produced. But in general, Browning's plays lack distinction. Long speeches occur where swift action is needed. The plot is obviously managed, instead of unfolding itself, and the characters, though often strange, are unimpressive. Gradually it became plain, even to Browning himself, that he had not yet found his proper field.

In 1841 a new project was formed. Since managers refused his plays and the public his books, Browning's father arranged with Moxon to issue a play from time to time in pamphlet form. For the series Browning chose the repellent name of *Bells and Pomegranates*. Few copies selling, even at the tempting price of sixpence, Moxon suggested that some poems of a briefer sort be added; and accordingly in the third number, in 1842, appeared the beginning of that wonderful series of *Dramatic Lyrics* in which Browning at last found his sure mode of expression.

The form of these pieces is the monologue, the drama of a single speaker. So peculiarly suited to Browning is the scheme that we are apt to think it his invention. But it has been used in all periods of English poetry. Drayton's *Heroical Epistles* are monologues; so are Pope's *Eloisa to Abelard* and Cowper's *Alexander Selkirk*. Tennyson in *St. Simeon Stylites* employed it as early, and afterwards almost as frequently, as Browning himself; in *Maud* giving it greater variety than does Browning in *James Lee's Wife*. No, in the monologue Browning merely accepted a not uncommon form as an instrument for painting individual character more accurately than was possible in the sequent study of a single soul or the conversation of a contrasted group. As soon as Browning had created the Dramatic Lyric he abandoned play-writing altogether. The new method preserved all that was valuable both in it and its lumbering predecessor, attained the full individualism at which

Romanticism had long unsuccessfully aimed, introduced a new type into English poetry, and brought before its readers such a company of living men and women as it had not seen since Chaucer died.

For Browning added elements to the monologue which greatly increased its power and adapted it to his special work. They do not appear in all his pieces in equal degree. But about in proportion to their presence and prominence is the importance of the poem. As they become blurred, the monologue loses something of its quality. They are these: (1) His monologue is dramatic, addressed to a listener. (2) It is psychological, disclosing the speaker rather than what is spoken of. (3) It is comprehensive and sums up a complex and habitual character. I will explain briefly each of these points.

Browning's monologue at its best—as in *Andrea del Sarto*, *Fra Lippo Lippi*, *Clive*, *The Laboratory*, *In a Year*—is no mere soliloquy, a piece of introspective analysis, as most preceding monologues had been. His are veritable dramas, involving several persons, to only one of whom do we attend. The mind of him who speaks is everywhere in contact with another mind, which it seeks to bring over to its own point of view. It is as if we stood by a telephone and heard its user speak to a distant friend, and were left to guess at the situation by the fragmentary utterances of only one side. But it is dialogue still. An unseen interlocutor is there, and what we hear has constant reference to his thought. Undoubtedly there are shadings between such completed monologues and soliloquy. In *The Ring and the Book* most of the speakers seek to impress their own view of the case on definite persons. The Pope does not. He is alone and soliloquizes. But his is not like *Abt Vogler's* or *Johannes Agricola's*, mere soliloquy; for he addresses a plea for mercy or condemnation to God, the Church, public opinion, and argues it out with each.

The dramatic advantage of such monologue over the ordinary play lies in the concentration of interest. Where all else is subordinated to a single individual, we more readily identify ourselves with him than if he were but one of a group.

But if the monologue, unlike the soliloquy, has an objective reference to a supposed auditor and outward situation, our interest is not fixed on these. On the contrary, they are but a means for giving to the speaker an importance greater even than he has in the soliloquy, and far greater than in the narrative. They might be compared to a sounding-board, reflecting back in fuller tone the character of the speaker. In judging another, we judge ourselves. Our estimate of a person or event may be incorrect; but if given at an unguarded moment, it is stamped with the impress of him who makes it. This is the profound truth on which Browning's monologue is based. In order to present a person, it is unnecessary to trace successive "incidents in the development of a soul," to watch the man's behavior in society, or to hear him soliloquize. There is a shorter and more illuminating way. A minute of a life as truly contains the character as fifty years. If we would know what a man is, we have only to throw a flash-light on him at a crisis-moment and watch his reaction. That is Browning's new method. The serial scaffolding is torn down, the group dismissed, the narrative suppressed. Only the dramatic essence remains—a mind reacting on a defined person and situation. The first ten years of Browning's authorship had been spent on the soliloquy, the narrative, and the play; and the first two of these were still to ravage his last twenty years. Even during his years of Mastery the narrative appears as late as 1845 in the beautiful *Italian in England*, the soliloquy in *Christmas Eve* of 1850, and something like a play in *In a Balcony* of 1853. But these forms are now sub-

ordinate. A shorter and more luminous method has been found.

It should be noticed too that while Browning's flash-light is usually a brief affair, it illuminates not a single mood but a total complex individual. For this it is peculiarly fitted. Tennyson shows us in *Sir Galahad* only chivalric purity; but Browning's Duke, displaying the picture of his last Duchess, is himself a full-length portrait. His dignity, courtesy, cruelty, interest in sculpture, in painting, unite, unconsciously and without exaggeration, to show this cross-section of a Renaissance aristocrat. As Browning's aim too is not moral instruction but the dispassionate study of individual character, good and evil qualities are allowed to intertwine in the same perplexing fashion as in actual life.

Here then is a new and majestic type, and one of deep consequence for the depicting of humanity in English poetry. Of course Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning all alike deal with human nature. But Wordsworth deals with its fundamentals, Tennyson with its single moods, and only after long writing does individual man come to his own. With Browning the creation of character is its own abundant justification. When a poet can truly say, "Here they are, my fifty men and women," we have no right to ask if they are such as will be socially valuable.

Nor must we be disturbed at certain unpleasing characteristics sure to mark the work of such a poet. Laying stress on the individual factor in life rather than the social, he will be disposed to care little for beauty, good taste, and conventional refinement, and will pick out subjects that are peculiar, erratic, even abnormal. In boyhood Browning cared for strange pets, bizarre stories, forced rhymes. They prepared him for his realistic work. His poems introduce us to people who are half insane—*Porphyria's Lover*, *Giraldus*, *Childe Roland*—or to those

morally repulsive, like Fifine, Sludge, and Guido Franceschini. Yet when abnormal persons are shown to be living creatures, our hearts beat in sympathetic response. Nothing human is without interest. But it must be remembered that if these strange beings are to be transferred imaginatively to printed pages, they will use their own language. It would be bad art to offer them the standard language, such as is current among ladies and gentlemen. Not being ladies and gentlemen, they should use the language which accords with their special character. It will not do to be shocked at a diction unheard in poetry before.

On similar grounds some excuse may be found for Browning's notorious obscurities. They spring from fecundity, not feebleness. He can say anything he pleases, and say it with utmost precision. But what pleases him does not always please us. He is a man richly endowed, venturing into strange regions. His crowding thoughts often obtrude on one another, and if we fail to catch his point of view, we do not readily comprehend him. From usual modes of speech, as from usual characters, he is constitutionally averse. In a letter in my possession sent him from New Zealand, in 1846, by his friend Alfred Domett—the "Waring" of his poem—Domett writes: "As regards your books, I have one first and last request to make or advice to give you. Do for Heaven's sake try to be commonplace. Strain as much for it as weaker poets do against it. And always write for fools. Think of them as your audience, instead of the Sidneys and Marvells and Landors. Ask some one—the dullest, ploddingest, acquaintance you have—how he or she (if you can find a woman quite stupid enough) would have expressed your thought, and take his or her arrangement. Will you do this? I fear not. Yet I know that herein lies your truest course." Browning preserved the letter but rejected the advice. As an

improvisatore of singular genius, he could learn nothing from criticism. The more the public grumbled, the more firmly he set his teeth and walked his devious way. We may regret that he could not, like Tennyson, draw aid from his enemies. But genius has its limitations and compulsions. He was not writing for others, but merely to create children of his brain, writing for himself. All we can ask of such a man is that he accept good-naturedly the isolation involved in his work. Browning did not do so, but from time to time bitterly complained that he was not understood. So individual a writer, attempting an altogether new line, should have been as indifferent to public opinion as was Wordsworth. Browning was resentful of disparagement and strangely tolerant of organized adulation. Some social feeling is apt to linger about the extremest individualist.

Yet while the creation of individual characters was the special function of Browning, he was not always able to carry it out dispassionately. He too was an individual, possessed of beliefs, moral approvals, and a temperament of his own. Through these he views the characters he constructs, and by these they are liable to be distorted. A great poet is distinguished from a poetic writer by the very fact that he has acquired a fixed point of view from which to survey all that comes before him. Nobody can be impressive without a creed, gospel, or set of habitual ideas with which he confronts the world. What we may call the creed of Browning is, if I rightly understand it, something like this:

To each man there is intrusted a unique character, unlike all others, but incomplete, and with higher and lower possibilities. Which of these possibilities shall prevail is determined by the man's own action at crisis-moments, which in themselves are often small. Sin, for Browning, is therefore, for the most part, injury to one's self rather than to society; and conventional sins are



little regarded. The world is for each of us a place of moral training and discipline, and has meaning only as material out of which a person may be formed. A world so constituted implies a God, whose existence cannot be independently proved but is involved in the whole framework of things. His presence is testified to by the Bible and by the consciousness of all men at their highest. This God is a being of power and knowledge, though still like ourselves. In ourselves we see that power and knowledge are merely instrumental to love, which is the highest manifestation of personality. Were God without love, we should be his superiors. Browning does not then conceive God as manifested in law, that is, in scientific fashion; but as the life-principle of love, in an individualistic way. Matter is but a lower form of spirit, and what look like circumstances are, in reality, only a reflex of the person. God lovingly imparts to us the germs of his own life. Consequently there is an immortality of activity open to each of us, whether in ever fresh existence or in a single continuous existence. But recognition will always be possible. Anything but optimism is stupid and cowardly.

Such in briefest outline is Browning's creed, the body of ideas through which he interprets the world. A noble creed it is, with which in substance I heartily agree. Yet it is not the primary business of an artist to inculcate doctrine. Doctrine, of course, will underlie his work, just as it underlies all life. Our world is bound together by laws or principles, which no true representation of it can disregard. But they are mixed with things, and to detach them for separate statement destroys that concrete unity which it is the artist's office to discover and present. We may say, if we like, that Hamlet teaches the dangers of delay, and Antony those of impulse. But the plays were not constructed for that purpose. Shakspeare sought merely to present an interesting section of

human life, and did it with such truth that we can draw from it a moral lesson, as we can from nature itself. The artist is primarily a seer, not a teacher. His characters and situations are no mere means to moral instruction as ends. They are themselves their own end.

Now notwithstanding Browning's extraordinary power of artistic creation, he will not always submit to its laws, but often puts into a poem matter which the subject does not demand. He has some theory to maintain, some lesson to impart, some clever thought has struck him, and he steps forward to offer his own ideas instead of leaving us to view the mind of an imagined character. No doubt it was difficult to be a dispassionate expositor. His beliefs were clear and urgent, and it is much more natural for the Englishman and American to turn to moralizing than to art. The art-sense is feeble among readers today. Then too strong influences were unhappily brought to bear, impelling Browning away from his unique office of character-creator to be the deliverer of a moral "message." Read the following passage from one of the letters of Miss Barrett to him just after he had discovered his new method and had begun to apply it in constructive work. On May 26, 1846, immediately preceding their marriage, she writes:

"But you—you have the superabundant mental life and individuality which admits of shifting a personality and speaking the truth still. *That* is the highest faculty, the strongest and rarest which exercises itself in art—we are all agreed there is none so great faculty as the dramatic. Several times you have hinted to me that I made you careless for the drama, and it has puzzled me to fancy how it could be, when I understand myself so clearly both the difficulty and the glory of dramatic art. Yet I am conscious of wishing you to take the other crown besides, and after having made your own creatures speak in clear human voices, to speak yourself

out of that personality which God made, and with the voice which He tuned into such power and sweetness of speech. I do not think that, with all that music in you, only your own personality should be dumb, nor that having thought so much and deeply on life and its ends, you should not teach what you have learnt in the direct and most impressive way, the mask thrown off, however moist with the breath. And it is not, I believe, by the dramatic medium that poets teach most impressively. I have seemed to observe that! It is too difficult for the common reader to analyze and to discern between the vivid and the earnest. Also he is apt to understand better always when he sees the lips move. Now here is yourself with your wonderful faculty!—it is wondered at and recognized on all sides where there are eyes to see—it is called wonderful and admirable! Yet with an inferior power you might have taken yourself closer to the hearts and lives of men, and made yourself dearer, though being less great. Therefore I do want you to do this with your surpassing power—it will be so easy to you to speak, and so noble when spoken.

“Not that I usen’t to fancy I could see you and know you, in a reflex image, in your creations! I used, you remember. How these broken lights and forms look strange and unlike now to me when I stand by the complete idea! Yes, *now* I feel that no one can know you worthily by these poems. Only—I guessed a little. *Now* let us have your own voice speaking of yourself—if the voice may not hurt the speaker—which is my fear.”

How exquisitely said, and how poisonous! Not only too was this poison given by her who was dearest, it came from the outside world as well. That Dr. Furnival who founded the Browning Societies writes thus, in eulogy of Browning’s Essay on Shelley:

“The interest in this piece lay in the fact that Browning’s utterances here are his, and not those of any one of

the so many imaginary persons behind whom he insists on so often hiding himself, and whose necks I for one should continually like to wring, whose bodies I would fain kick out of the way, in order to get face to face with the poet himself, and hear his own voice speaking his own thoughts, man to man and soul to soul. Straight speaking, straight hitting suit me best."

Yes, they always suit the prosaic Englishman best. In his mind the teacher is regularly set above the artist. In Browning's poetry both are present. It is strange that when in a neighboring art Browning had called attention to this distinction between naturalistic portraiture and endeavor after edification, and given strong preference to the former, he should so frequently in his own art have taken the lower course. In his poem of *Fra Lippo Lippi* we see the painter covering the walls of his cloister with pictures of unmistakable men and women. Then we hear the Prior's reproach:

"How? What's here?  
Quite from the mark of painting! Bless us all!  
Faces, arms, legs, and bodies, like the true  
As much as pea and pea! It's devil's game.  
Your business is not to catch men with show,  
With honor to the perishable clay,  
But lift them over it, ignore it all."

To which Fra Lippo replies:

"Say there's beauty with no soul at all  
(I never saw it, put the case the same).  
If you get simple beauty and naught else,  
You get about the best thing God invents."

What a pity that Browning, abandoning naturalistic representation, for which he had as fine a genius as the Florentine monk, should so frequently have given way to sententious moralizings!

We hardly exaggerate when we say that there are two Brownings: one, the seer, who firmly and disinterestedly pursues his constructive art and, having observed all the subtleties of a character, is satisfied if he can present us a living being who announces no "lesson"; and then there is the teacher, who cannot escape from himself and is busy with inculcating his own special creed. It is no wonder that as time went on, this facile teacher, emancipated from the restraint of character-building, took on more and more the voice of Browning, became ever more wordy, and recorded more clumsily in rugged rhythms whatever random reflections came into his head. Browning had always loved argument and been amused to see what might be said in behalf of a bad cause. This tendency to sophistry grew upon him. We see it at its best in portions of *The Ring and the Book*; at its worst, in *Fifine* and in the *Parleyings*. In Browning's last period little sense of form remains. He often seems to write merely in order to let loose the miscellaneous workings of his mind. Only occasionally is it worth while to read what follows *The Ring and the Book*. After that time the teacher, the sophist, the random talker, are chiefly in evidence; the constructive artist has pretty completely disappeared. It may help some of my readers to trace for themselves the two tendencies in Browning if I group together a few illustrative poems. Much of his work admits no such clear classification. The same poem often contains material of different kinds. But if we select a group to show Browning's power as a constructive artist, it will include such as these: *The Bishop Orders His Tomb*, *Andrea del Sarto*, *Childe Roland*, *The Flight of the Duchess*, *In a Gondola*, *James Lee's Wife*, *The Italian in England*, *Confessions*, *Hervé Riel*, *Life at a Villa*, *The Glove*, *My Last Duchess*. All these poems move us by the imaginative accuracy with which the particular person or situation is presented.

A second group may show how oftentimes, though doctrine is evidently the object of the poem, it still embodies itself in concrete, personal form: *Fra Lippo Lippi*, *The Statue and the Bust*, *Caliban Upon Setebos*, *Saul*, *Cleon*, *The Strange Epistle of Karshish*, *A Grammarian's Funeral*. These are all intended to teach something, but they teach in a dramatic way.

And then we go over into the poems of preaching, directly announcing abstract truths. A little group of the strongest would be these: *Abt Vogler*, *One Word More*, *Old Pictures in Florence*, *Any Wife to any Husband*, *A Death in the Desert*, *Rabbi Ben Ezra*. The last may be regarded as Browning's reply to Omar Khayyám; *A Death in the Desert*, his reply to Straus. Such verse makes interesting reading; but the interest is a moral one. It has little to do with imaginative art.

In *The Ring and the Book*, written at the height of his powers and after long experimentation in other fields, Browning has left a complete epitome of his genius. The piece is of colossal proportions, original, terrific, and subtly imaginative beyond any poem of its century. In scope and majesty it takes no presumptuous place beside the glories of our earlier poetry, with *Troilus and Cressida*, *The Faery Queen*, *King Lear*, and *Samson Agonistes*. The Greeks had a way of choosing some hideous legend, "presenting Thebes or Pelops' line," and by its complete presentation in mellifluous language letting pity and fear effect their own purgation. That is what Browning has done. The squalid circumstance of a Roman murder trial more than two centuries gone by, he has made to live again as a thing of beauty and moral significance, acquainting us with the special temper of its distant time and with the baseness and exaltation which belong to humanity at all times. In these twenty thousand lines, put together during nine

years, there is room enough for all Browning's characteristics to find their place without damage to the total structure. Here are his argumentation, his searching psychology, his wide-ranging reading and observation, his interest in whatever is peculiar and out of the way, his profound religious sense, his tenderness, brutality and optimism, his love of mental adventure, occasionally too his mere loquacity. A strange mixture it is, wrought out in what I have called the completed form of his monologue, with appropriate attendant listeners, without soliloquy, narrative, or "message," and finding its sufficient end in a marvellous group of contrasted personalities.

*The Ring and the Book* too announces with startling clearness a fundamental principle of Browning's art to which I have hitherto paid too little attention. It is the principle of "the point of view," and with it his special type of poetry is inherently connected. We know how insistently personal that poetry is. Each man is unique; his nature, nurture, and circumstance differing in some respects from that of his neighbor. Accordingly the powers by which we apprehend truth will vary, and what is true for one of us will not be true for another. There is no standard set of powers by reference to which absolute truth may be known. Reality is always relative. Each of us brings with him a point of view, from which he cannot escape. The doctrine of the point of view accordingly underlies all that Browning writes. Something personal is always added to reality as a formative factor whenever we approach a fact. In *The Ring and the Book* what we call the same story is told by nine different people, and to the last we do not know—nor very much care—what the facts in themselves may really be. We only know how they look from these several points of view. The wise man then will fix his attention rather on the beholder than on the things alleged to be

beheld. "There's nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so," Hamlet says. To comprehend a human soul, Browning has told us, is the one thing in the world deserving study. The great service of the poets lies in their teaching us to look at the world from other points of view than our own.

Now *The Ring and the Book* is a veritable school for this sort of instruction, and that its teachings may impress us the more, they are conveyed in triadic form. Three groups, with three contrasted members in each, report to us what they know, and therefore what they are. A ghastly murder occurred at Rome in 1679. Giuseppe Caponsacchi, a priest, ran away from Arezzo to Rome with Pompilia, the girl-wife of Guido Franceschini, a brutal and impoverished noble. Guido pursued the fugitives and subsequently killed Pompilia and her reputed parents, he himself being finally executed. Each of these three chief actors in the affair tells his story, no two alike. But the people of Rome are likewise interested, one part of them taking the wife's side, one the husband's; and besides these, those who, putting away all sentiment, see right on each side and pride themselves on judging all by pure intellect. Each one of this group not involved in the affair lets us learn how his mind has been affected. Then appears the legal group, the advocate of each party with the Pope, the judge of all. At the very last, and after Guido is condemned and is about to pass from his prison to the scaffold, he is allowed to speak once more, and then discloses a side of himself and his story unlike what was heard before.

Here then a story is told ten times without ever failing in interest. This is because by Browning's "new method" the event is transfused through personalities which it illuminates in every part. Where else outside Shakspeare has individual experience been painted on such a scale? The long struggle of Romanticism, moving in



the direction of Browning's new type and new method, culminates in this masterpiece and shows itself capable of prodigious effects. No wonder the coming of something so huge created disturbance in the public mind. People must be either violently repelled or ardently attracted by this unflinching poet of the personal life. We may say that Tennyson and Browning summarize the imaginative life of their century. Browning shows the beginning of that Naturalism which henceforth, for good or ill, was to flood our poetry. Tennyson sings regretfully the shimmering charm, the ideal beauty, the refinement, the wistfulness, which were soon to pass away.